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Henri de Lubac

David Grumett

In this chapter, I shall first examine the French Jesuit Henri de Lubac's retrieval of patristic and earlier medieval sources, especially in his role as co-director of the *Sources Chrétiennes* series. I shall suggest that this textual *ressourcement* was motivated by a concern, which was properly theological, to reconceive the human person and human action in their relation to God, but that this theological concern was philosophically motivated by Maurice Blondel. These historical and philosophical currents flowed together into de Lubac's fundamental theology, especially the *Théologie* series, which de Lubac was also instrumental in establishing and to which he contributed several volumes. I shall conclude by assessing the relative importance and interrelation of these different strands in his retrieval project.

Retrieval, the *Sources Chrétiennes* and Origen

1940 was an inauspicious year to launch a major new project in theological publishing. France was divided into an occupied northern sector, centred on Paris, and a notionally free southern zone, which was governed from the spa town of Vichy in the Auvergne. On both sides of the division, some Jesuits were viewed with suspicion by the state authorities for their protests against antisemitism and Jewish registration. Within the Church, the standard model for biblical and historical studies was positivist, while in the university theology faculties of the Third Republic new scholarly departures were discouraged. Because of wartime shortages, even the printing paper was of poor quality.¹

Nevertheless, the obstacles to a major new project also justified its pursuit. The rise of Nazism, the persecution of Jews and the tumult of war were viewed by many theologians and clergy as symptoms of a national crisis that was fundamentally spiritual, and which, being such, required a theological response by the whole Church. With this end in view, de Lubac, Pierre Chaillet and some of their Jesuit confrères in the occupied zone instigated the *Cahiers du Témoignage chrétien*.² Printed in secret and circulated via underground networks, this journal exhorted Christians to resist Nazism by providing unredacted texts of papal pronouncements and disseminating extracts from comparable writings by theologians in other European countries, such as Karl Barth.

This effort to shape the attitudes of ordinary Christians, undertaken at tremendous personal risk, needed to be accompanied by a similar project to influence clergy and theologians. In France, there was a strong tradition of publishing patristic and medieval texts, exemplified by the massive editions of the Abbé Jacques-Paul Migne.³ It was not the case that patristic and earlier medieval texts were unavailable, nor that they had not been extensively circulated. The problem was, rather,

¹ Etienne Fouilloux, *La Collection 'Sources chrétiennes': éditer les Pères de l'Eglise au XXe siècle* (Paris: Cerf, 1995). For the contexts of war and antisemitism, also Kevin L. Hughes, 'Deep Reasonings: *Sources Chrétiennes*, *Ressourcement*, and the Logic of Scripture in the Years before—and after—Vatican II', *Modern Theology* 29 (2013), 32–45.

² *Cahiers et courriers clandestins du Témoignage chrétien: 1941–1944*, ed. Renée Bédarida (Paris: Éditions ouvrières, 1977); edited as *La Résistance spirituelle, 1941–1944: les cahiers clandestins du Témoignage chrétien* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001). For overview, James Bernauer, 'A Jesuit spiritual insurrection: resistance to Vichy', in *'The Tragic Couple': Encounters between Jews and Jesuits*, eds James Bernauer and Robert A. Maryks (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 203–15; and generally, W.D. Halls, *Politics, Society and Christianity in Vichy France* (Oxford: Berg, 1995), 95–147.

³ *Patrologiae Graecae Cursus Completus* (166 vols; Paris: Migne, 1857–66); *Patrologiae Latinae Cursus Completus* (217 vols; Paris: Migne, 1844–55). For wider context, Émile Poulat, « Le renouveau des études patristiques en France et la crise moderniste », in *Patristique et Antiquité tardive en Allemagne et en France de 1870 à 1930*, eds Jacques Fontaine, Reinhart Herzog and Karla Pullmann (Paris: Institut d'études augustiniennes, 1993), 20–9.

that such texts had not been deployed to shape constructive theology. Migne's editions were large and uncritical, and omitted any translation from the original Greek or Latin.

The form of the existing texts was not the only obstacle to their theological use. At the time, the dominant theological paradigm in France and other Roman Catholic countries was scholasticism. As Rudolf Voderholzer argues in his assessment of de Lubac's project, this neglected historicity, both through ignoring the impact of contingent events on theological development and by taking revelation to be objectively true independently of its historical context.⁴ By bringing new editions of patristic and earlier medieval texts into the theological arena, de Lubac hoped to demonstrate that revelation is historical, with this history being rooted in, and pointing to, scripture and the action of Christ. David Ford spells out the wide practical import of this project, rightly noting de Lubac's deep involvement in both the Church and the world, and that his motivation for immersing himself in the texts and history of the past was a passionate concern for the present.⁵

The new series, which de Lubac was instrumental in founding, became known as the *Sources Chrétiennes*. Notably, it was a cooperative venture between Jesuit editors and the new Dominican publishing house Éditions du Cerf, which had been established in 1929 at the behest of Pope Pius XI with the aim of reviving Christian spirituality by returning it to its historic sources.⁶ The efforts of Cerf in the northern zone, and especially of its editor Thomas-Georges Chiffot, were complemented by those of its imprint in the southern zone, Éditions de l'Abeille. The images of the stag (*le cerf*) and the bee (*l'abeille*) suitably indicated the complementary endeavours that the project would demand, as well as the results it would achieve.⁷ While the stag majestically traverses the hills in quest of the flowing streams of truth springing out of the rock, the bee works unseen to collect and produce a sweet and sustaining substance.

In his memoir, de Lubac recounts in detail the inception of the *Sources*, attributing the original idea to Victor Fontoynt, who was prefect of the Jesuit scholasticate at Fourvière in Lyons and whose role in nurturing the work of de Lubac and his confrères is generally under-acknowledged. Fontoynt, de Lubac states, had intended the series to promote ecumenical links between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches.⁸ This accounts for its Greek focus in the early years: only after six years was the first volume published of a Latin author, Hilary of Poitiers.⁹ Moreover, Fontoynt believed that his Church needed to recover its roots in Greek theology in order to redress an excessive dependence on Ambrose, Augustine and Jerome. However, Fontoynt was himself too old to assume the demands of directing such a large enterprise. Chaillet and Pierre Rondet were each approached, but were indisposed due to war mobilization and academic administration respectively. At this point, de Lubac was invited to assume responsibility and accepted. In conjunction with his Parisian confrère Jean Daniélou, he proposed translations of classic Greek and Latin texts that would include a substantial introduction by the translator. Not all of the early translations had the original text in parallel; however, those that did not were republished, with this arrangement soon becoming the norm.

De Lubac intended that the patristic and earlier medieval *Sources* would broaden conservative scholasticism, which employed the methodology of later medieval theology, but also

⁴ Rudolf Voderholzer, 'Dogma and History: Henri de Lubac and the Retrieval of Historicity', *Communio (US)* 28 (2001), 648–68.

⁵ David F. Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 12–21.

⁶ Étienne Fouilloux, « Autour de l'histoire des 'Sources Chrétiennes' », in *Fe i teologia en la història : estudis en honor del Prof. Dr. Evangelista Vilanova*, eds Joan Busquets and Maria Martinell (Barcelona: Facultat de Teologia de Catalunya, 1997), 519–35.

⁷ Albert Fandos, « Le cerf et l'abeille : méditation allégorique », at http://www.gregoiredenysse.com/?page_id=285 [accessed 25 April 2016].

⁸ Henri de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church: Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances that Occasioned his Writings*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1993), 94–5; Étienne Fouilloux, *Une église en quête de liberté : la pensée catholique française entre modernisme et Vatican II, 1914–62* (Paris: Desclée, 1998), 184.

⁹ Hilaire de Poitiers, *Traité des mystères*, trans. Jean-Paul Brisson, SC 19 (Paris: Cerf, 1947).

call into question modern liberal approaches that largely ignored historical sources. To these ends, he had already, in a large appendix to his 1938 study *Catholicisme*, published short extracts from texts that would later comprise some of the *Sources*. He there urged that the renewal of the Church would be promoted by an increased 'knowledge of the patristic period, as well as of the golden age of medieval theology, studied in conjunction with the former'.¹⁰ Among the excerpts were two from Gregory of Nyssa's *On the Making of Man* and others from the *Shepherd of Hermas*, Ignatius of Antioch's *Letter to the Magnesians*, Ambrose of Milan's *Exposition of the Gospel of Luke*, a Christmas sermon of St Leo the Great, and a treatise by Augustine on the first letter of John.¹¹ In *Catholicisme*, de Lubac also lays out some of the theological foundations for the *Sources*, stating that retrieval cannot employ mere imitation; rather, it demands an 'assimilation which is at the same time a transformation'.¹² This, de Lubac continues, is because of the theological diversity that any genuine recovery of past thought will inevitably uncover. Another reason why retrieval cannot be merely imitative is that theory depends upon social, intellectual and cultural factors that exist in a state of continual flux. For these reasons, de Lubac writes, a 'return to the sources of antiquity will be the very opposite of an escape into a dead past'.¹³ Rather, in the present age such a return will require a demanding and delicate combination of the Church's theological heritage with modern secular concerns and critique. What has arisen within the Church's body, he suggests, needs to be brought into constructive engagement with what has emerged outside of that body.

The patristic theologian in whom de Lubac took greatest interest was Origen. This is indicated by the unusual arrangements for the early volumes of the Alexandrian biblical exegete. The introductions to the *Sources* were normally produced by the translator. However, for the first two volumes of Origen, which were his homilies on Genesis and Exodus, de Lubac wrote the introduction himself.¹⁴ The Genesis introduction offers several useful indicators of his methodology of retrieval.¹⁵ At the outset, de Lubac states that he does not wish to 'defend' Origen but simply to understand him, recognizing the great intellectual and cultural distance that separated the third century from his own. Nevertheless, this quest for understanding includes identifying the accusations that were levelled against Origen—such as the Hellenizing of Christian theology, and departure from scripture's literal truth—and weighing their merits. De Lubac is alert to how his subject, and his theological commitments, have been viewed by critics as corresponding with contemporary intellectual tendencies and figures, specifically David Strauss and his mythologizing of the literal descriptions of Jesus's Gospel miracles. Nonetheless, he warns against hasty judgement of Origen's project, urging the reader to inhabit his work and sense its rhythm. Making direct reference to modern exegesis, de Lubac likens this to springs welling up in ground rendered arid by rationalism

¹⁰ De Lubac, *Catholicisme*, 319–20.

¹¹ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicisme : les aspects sociaux du dogme* (Paris: Cerf, 1947), trans. *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1988), 371–4, 380–1, 414–16, 426–7, 440–1. See Grégoire de Nysse, *La Création de l'homme*, trans. Jean Laplace, ed. Jean Daniélou, SC 6 (Paris: Cerf, 1943); Ignace d'Antioche and Polycarpe de Smyrne, *Lettres ; Martyre de Polycarpe*, trans. and ed. Pierre Thomas Camelot, SC 10 (Paris: Cerf, 1945); Léon le Grand, *Sermons*, trans. René Dolle, ed. Jean Leclercq, SC 22, 49, 74 (3 vols; Paris: Cerf, 1947–61); Ambroise, *Traité sur l'Evangile de S. Luc*, trans. and ed. Gabriel Tissot, SC 45, 52 (2 vols; Paris: Cerf, 1956–8); Hermas, *Le Pasteur*, trans. and ed. Robert Joly, SC 53 (Paris: Cerf, 1958); Augustin d'Hippone, *Commentaire de la Première Épître de S. Jean*, trans. and ed. Paul Agaësse, SC 75 (Paris: Cerf, 1961).

¹² De Lubac, *Catholicisme*, 321.

¹³ De Lubac, *Catholicisme*, 322.

¹⁴ Henri de Lubac, introduction to Origène, *Homélie sur la Genèse*, SC 7, trans. Louis Doutreleau (Paris: Cerf, 1944), 5–62; idem, introduction to Origène, *Homélie sur l'Exode*, SC 16, trans. P. [Joseph] Fortier (Paris: Cerf, 1947), 7–75. Although further homily volumes followed, Leviticus, to which de Lubac refers, was not in fact published until 1981. The two introductions provided the core material for all eight chapters of his *Histoire et esprit : l'intelligence de l'Écriture d'après Origène* (Paris: Aubier, 1950), trans. *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture according to Origen* by Anne Englund Nash with Juvenal Merriell (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 2007).

¹⁵ De Lubac, introduction to Origène, *Homélie sur la Genèse*, 6–8, 62.

and positivism. Origen, he suggests, can give greater theological confidence to readers of scripture today.

Some of de Lubac's other methodological commitments are displayed, at least implicitly, in his presentation of Origen the man.¹⁶ He acknowledges Origen's perception of himself as a defender of threatened faith as well as a protector of ordinary believers, recognizing that the questions he honestly addressed about the relation of classical and Christian learning, and how to interpret contradictory or difficult passages of scripture, were live in the first half of the third century. De Lubac pointedly acknowledges that his subject appeals not to 'Orthodoxy', which is so easily misunderstood as a fixed system of unchanging truth, but to tradition, which, although also a single whole, encompasses greater diversity. Then come two further counterintuitive assessments. Origen, de Lubac insists, was wary of the dangers of philosophy, likening it to several biblical images, such as the words of the serpent to Eve, the Israelite captivity in Egypt, offerings to idols, and the words of Solomon's wives, which drew the otherwise faithful king to worship other gods. Finally, de Lubac justifiably contends, Origen closely attended to scripture's literal sense, using it as the foundation for the spiritual interpretation that was nevertheless compatible with it.

Further methodological points are made in the Exodus introduction.¹⁷ Focusing on Origen's distinction between three senses of scripture—the historical, the mystical, and the moral/spiritual—de Lubac observes that a single scriptural episode, phrase or word may have several meanings. For instance, the flight out of Egypt may be read mystically, as an allegory for the passage from the shadows of error into the light of truth, or morally, as a flight from the current world into the age to come. To take another example, the distinction between the houses of Jacob, constructed out of solid material upon the Promised Land, and the tents of Israel, made from skin and repeatedly pitched and struck in the desert, may be taken as signifying spiritual perfection versus seeking, but equally, in historical terms, as the law in contrast with the prophets, or mystically, as the soul rather than the body. Such an exegetical mode, de Lubac avers, is eclectic, accommodating and always open. It is further embodied in the principle that, just as the Old Testament provides images and narratives that are completed in the New Testament, so the New Testament offers analogous images and narratives that are consummated only in the age to come. This is different from the typological view of the relation between the Testaments, which would later become standard, based on dualistic supersession, in which the New Testament fully completes and validates what is found in the Old Testament. Origen undermines any notion that the New Testament is self-sufficient or complete. Indeed, de Lubac shows him upholding *three* Testaments, with the New Testament subordinated, in its turn, to a future truth of which it is itself merely an image. This double typology allows an understanding of spiritual perfection as requiring historical and personal time. While accepting that Origen does not conceive of revelation as subject to historical development, de Lubac suggests that he does propose a view of salvation history as both immanently begun and transcendently completed that has quite different foundations from the large and simplistic immanentist schema of secular developmental theories. Finally, de Lubac draws from Origen a key interpretive principle that, in the 1940s, became his own: there is only one Spirit, which is of Christ, and any other human, historical or political spirit that is unrelated to Christ is counterfeit.

De Lubac's description of his initial hopes for the *Sources* is illuminating. At the outset, he and his confrères wished to situate particular texts within the wider tradition, nourish the faith of the next generation and combine ease of use with accessible pricing.¹⁸ The Library of the Fathers series, edited in England by Edward Pusey, John Keble and Charles Marriott, which theologically sustained the Oxford Movement, served as a model, although de Lubac hoped for volumes with a more acute critical perspective.¹⁹ He envisaged several series, including some devoted to the

¹⁶ De Lubac, introduction to Origène, *Homélies sur la Genèse*, 26, 31, 37, 41.

¹⁷ De Lubac, introduction to Origène, *Homélies sur l'Exode*, 7–8, 31–2, 34–42, 52.

¹⁸ De Lubac, *At the Service*, 317.

¹⁹ *A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church: Anterior to the Division of the East and West* (51 vols; London: Rivington and Oxford: Parker, 1838–81). This series formed the basis for the *Nicene and Post-Nicene*

theological literature of major modern languages, although adds self-deprecatingly that he ‘was not the Abbé Migne’.²⁰ From the perspectives of both breadth and intended readership, the present-day English language series that most closely correspond to what de Lubac originally had in mind are Newman Press’s Ancient Christian Writers, which commenced in 1946 and was acquired by Paulist in 1962, and Paulist’s counterpart Classics of Western Spirituality, which was founded in 1979 and, until 1989, jointly published in the United Kingdom by SPCK. However, the readership of the *Sources* was ultimately more scholarly, particularly because the texts were presented in parallel rather than in translation alone.

Philosophical Hermeneutics and Maurice Blondel

De Lubac’s interest in patristics is well known, and, as has already been shown, has received a good deal of attention over the past two decades, even if Aidan Nichols does well to emphasize that he wished equally to promote earlier medieval theology.²¹ Less clearly understood, however, is the contribution that philosophy made to his thought. De Lubac’s reading of modern philosophers was extensive, extending to unlikely figures such as the anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. Moreover, in a recent study, Joshua Furnal has demonstrated his debt to Kierkegaard. Examining explicit citations, allusions, turns of phrase and even the communicative style that de Lubac adopts in *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, *Paradoxes of Faith*, *The Discovery of God* and *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, Furnal builds a persuasive case that Kierkegaard significantly shaped de Lubac’s theology. Particular instances that Furnal identifies include: the use of the category of paradox to capture the complexity of the nature–grace relation; a deep appreciation of inward faith as complementing institutional church belonging; and the taking seriously of existential concerns, such as the possibility that God does not exist. Furnal avers: ‘Rather than construing *ressourcement* as a purely patristic enterprise, de Lubac’s engagement with Kierkegaard shows how the scope of *ressourcement* can be extended to include engagement with modern thought.’²²

De Lubac’s project of retrieval undoubtedly extended to modern sources, which sharpen its critical edge. As was seen in the last section, the fact that the *Sources* contained a scholarly introduction indicates that they were recognized as demanding critical contextualization and interpretation. In de Lubac’s constructive oeuvre, these are frequently achieved by the cumulative juxtaposition of contrasting sources and concepts from different eras in order to call modern secular assumptions into question, uncovering their genealogies in contestable theological suppositions and methods. For instance, in his work on the supernatural he shows how the modern idea of the subject as an autonomous, freely willing being emerged from the later medieval scholastic supposition that a realm of pure nature exists independently of divine grace, which was, in turn, grounded in a denial of the Augustinian acknowledgement that grace is needful even for purportedly purely natural human activities.²³ Similarly, in his study of Joachim of Fiore, de Lubac views the modern conception of history as developmental and as culminating in age of material satisfaction as an outworking of the Calabrian monk’s belief that history would be consummated in a third age of the Spirit, which, by separating the work and reign of the Spirit from the reigns of the Father and the Son, amounted to a corruption of true Trinitarian doctrine.²⁴ By tracing genealogies such as these, de

Fathers of the Christian Church, eds Philip Scaff and Henry Wace (28 vols; Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886–1900). See the discussion by Roger Pearse at http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/lfc_list.htm [accessed 13 April 2016].

²⁰ De Lubac, *At the Service*, 95, n. 25. The *Sources* in fact came to comprise four series: Greek, Latin, Monastic and Oriental.

²¹ Aidan Nichols, *Catholic Thought Since the Enlightenment: A Survey* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), 137.

²² Joshua Furnal, *Catholic Theology after Kierkegaard* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 104–43 (105).

²³ Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel : études historiques* (Paris: Aubier, 1946).

²⁴ Henri de Lubac, *La Postérité spirituelle de Joachim de Flore* (2 vols; Paris: Lethielleux, 1979–81).

Lubac wished to demonstrate that classic Christian theology does not denigrate humans nor their communities, but, when correctly understood, contests the secular anthropologies, philosophies and sociologies that themselves fail to cognize human dignity.

Returning to Kierkegaard, some twentieth century Christian theologians have taken him as an ally. Nevertheless, his individualistic perspective on faith was, for de Lubac, ultimately unsatisfactory, even if it corrected excessively collectivist and objectivist approaches to belief. The philosopher who exerted the greatest positive influence on de Lubac was Maurice Blondel, whose philosophy of action shaped the content and method of de Lubac's theological hermeneutics of retrieval. De Lubac espoused Blondel's view, which the latter systematically expounded in his paradigm-shifting study *L'Action*, that philosophy has a unique negative role to play in preparing the mind for theology by demonstrating the falsity of premature resolutions of speculative problems. This negative philosophy leads the mind through an intellectual ascent in which the speculative problem in question—which was, in Blondel's case, the nature of human action—is set within a series of progressively wider concrete contexts that include family, country and humanity. Eventually, however, even the universality of humanity is seen to provide an inadequate context because it supposes a merely immanent order of being. Philosophy thereby leads the mind to a threshold at which it recognizes the inevitable transcendence of the solution to speculative problems. At this point, theology assumes the leading role in offering resolutions, which draw on its distinctive sources of scripture, tradition and church teaching, to the problems that philosophical speculation has posed but has been unable to resolve.

How this progression works in practice may be seen with closer reference to the presenting problem of action. In considering this, Blondel distinguishes the willing will (*la volonté voulante*) from the willed will (*la volonté voulue*).²⁵ Expressing this more simply, there is a difference between what I will in the abstract and how I in fact exercise my will in concrete situations. This double willing cannot be synthesized, Blondel argues, by the unaided effort of the actor. The conflict between the willing will and the willed will may be resolved, he contends, only by the activity of an absolute principle, which appears as the 'forced presence of a new affirmation in consciousness'.²⁶ This necessary presence orients action to the transcendent, thereby bringing together the human will and the divine will in what Blondel strikingly describes as a 'secret nuptial'.²⁷ In a person's action, a principle operating from outside of them is thereby at work within them, unifying their divided will. Blondel describes this principle as the 'absolute', which is known and possessed in action through its reconciling power.²⁸

That de Lubac's theology was philosophically impelled is suggested by the ordering of his posthumous *Oeuvres complètes* by Cerf, which follows that adopted by Jaca for his *Opera Omnia* in Italian translation, which began during his lifetime and about which he was consulted.²⁹ The opening volume is not a tome of patristic or early medieval exegesis but his frequently overlooked study *Sur les chemins de Dieu*, which was originally published in 1956 as an expanded version of a study that had first appeared in 1945.³⁰ Translated as *The Discovery of God*, this fundamentally Blondelian work reflects the Roman Catholic lay philosopher's deep and wide influence on French Jesuits of de Lubac's generation—including key figures in the *Sources* and *Théologie* series such as Fontoynt, Gaston Fessard and Henri Bouillard—that continued during the years leading up to Blondel's death

²⁵ Maurice Blondel, *Action: Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, trans. Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), §§ 19, 42, 132; 32, 53, 134–5.

²⁶ Blondel, *Action*, § 339, 314.

²⁷ Blondel, *Action*, § 371, 342.

²⁸ Blondel, *Action*, §§ 117, 378, 420; 122, 348, 385.

²⁹ Henri de Lubac, *Oeuvres complètes* (50 vols; Paris: Cerf, 1999–); idem, *Opera Omnia* (32 vols; Milan: Jaca, 1975–2009).

³⁰ Henri de Lubac, *Sur les chemins de Dieu* (Paris: Aubier, 1956); idem, *De la connaissance de Dieu* (Paris: Editions du Témoignage chrétien, 1945).

in 1949 and beyond.³¹ Close to opening of the book's second chapter, on the affirmation of God, which is pivotal for the book as a whole, de Lubac writes:

Every human act, whether it is an act of knowledge or an act of the will, rests secretly upon God, by attributing meaning and solidity to the real upon which it is exercised. For God is the Absolute; and nothing can be thought without positing the Absolute in relating it to that Absolute; nothing can be willed without tending towards the Absolute, nor valued unless weighed in terms of the Absolute.³²

This description of human action could have been composed by Blondel: the absolute, who is God, is a transcendent presence at the heart of reality and provides the basis for human knowledge of that reality.³³

The impact on de Lubac of Blondel's demonstration that natural human affirmation and action must be sustained by divine power has been justifiably stressed in French, German and Italian scholarship.³⁴ In a letter of 3 April 1932, composed fourteen years before he was to publish *Surnaturel*, de Lubac wrote to Blondel about the hypothesis of a state of pure nature, which is the idea that a realm of being may, in principle, exist independently of divine grace.³⁵ De Lubac concurs with Blondel's contestation of the notion that any such realm may exist in reality, although on notably different grounds. Whereas Blondel had sought to demonstrate, from the standpoint of the philosopher, the insufficiency of any purely natural philosophy, de Lubac wished to prosecute Blondel's project from the side of theology. In a second letter to Blondel, he writes:

If I let myself dream before you about the elaboration of a theology of the Supernatural, it was with the idea, not at all that you should do it, but that it could now be done because your philosophical work had paved the way. . . . Although incompetent in pure philosophy, my ambition would be to demonstrate that one day, on the level of the most positive theology. The completion and implementation of the already voluminous file I have gradually put together awaits only a renewal of strength that Providence will perhaps not grant me.³⁶

The open acknowledgement that Blondel's work 'paved the way' for his own, several decades before it appeared, suggests that, at the least, the philosophical reorientation of scholasticism was the necessary prolegomenon to de Lubac's project of theological retrieval. Nevertheless, Blondel's philosophy also exerted an influence upon the content of de Lubac's theological retrieval, informing his broadly humanistic selection and interpretation of patristic and earlier medieval theologians as

³¹ Peter Henrici, « La descendance blondelienne parmi les jésuites français », in *Blondel et la philosophie française*, eds Emmanuel Gabellieri and Pierre de Cointet (Paris: Parole et silence, 2007), 305–22; Fouilloux, *Une église*, 174–81; Jacques Guillet, « Courants théologiques dans la compagnie de Jésus en France (1930–1939) », in *Spiritualité, théologie et résistance. Yves de Montcheuil, théologien au macquis de Vercors*, eds Pierre Bolle and Jean Godel (Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 1987), 35–41. For an overview, covering the period up to Pope John Paul II, William L. Portier, 'Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology and the Triumph of Maurice Blondel', *Communio* 38 (2011), 103–37.

³² Henri de Lubac, *The Discovery of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 36.

³³ Also de Lubac, *The Discovery*, 64–5, 85, 94, 106, 134.

³⁴ Jean-Pierre Wagner, *Henri de Lubac* (Paris: Cerf, 2001), 33–7; Antonio Russo, *Henri de Lubac : teologia e dogma nella storia : l'influsso di Blondel* (Rome: Studium, 1990), 275–317; Rudolf Voderholzer, *Meet Henri de Lubac: His Life and Work*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1988), 122–8; Hans Urs von Balthasar and Georges Chantaine, *Le Cardinal de Lubac : l'homme et son oeuvre* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1983), 108–9. Recently, see also Francesca Aran Murphy, 'The influence of Maurice Blondel', in *T&T Clark Companion to Henri de Lubac*, ed. Jordan Hillebert (London: T&T Clark, 2017).

³⁵ Henri de Lubac, letter to Maurice Blondel of 3 April 1932, in *At the Service*, 183–5.

³⁶ De Lubac, letter to Blondel of 8 April 1932, in *At the Service*, 187–8.

refuting a theological anthropology based on the idea of pure nature with a view of humans as illumined and given their full dignity by God. Indeed, de Lubac goes so far as to identify Blondel's conception of Christian philosophy—'the synthesis of all knowledge, operating in the light of faith'—with that espoused by the Fathers of the Church, contrasting this with Jacques Maritain's belief that philosophy could operate largely independently of faith, as well as with Étienne Gilson's view of reason as generated solely by revelation.³⁷

Returning to *The Discovery of God*, numerous uses of patristic texts are identifiable that give theological content to Blondel's philosophical thesis that the Absolute is implicit in all human acts of knowing and willing. To take just one example, de Lubac refers to Clement of Alexandria's notion of *prolepsis*, or anticipation, which he develops in book 2 of his *Stromateis*, as the confident faith upon which the life of the Spirit rests. Clement, who was a Greek convert to Christianity, concurred with his Gnostic opponents Basilides and Valentinus that philosophy is essential in the quest for true knowledge. However, he did not accept that philosophy could ever be the purely natural exercise of human ingenuity. Rather, the divine power is always present, and due to wisdom the 'foreign philosophy we follow is in actual fact complete and true'. There is no knowledge (apprehension) without an act of faith (preconception), which is the 'spring of action, being the foundation of an act of choice based on thought . . . in a preliminary and actual demonstration'.³⁸ De Lubac also deploys Clement in his critique of Nazism and Communism, when he quotes an extended passage in which faith is presented not as destroying humanity but as exalting and completing it. He cites Clement's statement that the 'sun of righteousness', 'having snatched man out of the jaws of destruction raised him to the sky, transplanting corruption to the soil of incorruption, and transforming earth into heaven', thereby 'granting to us the Father's truly great, divine and inalienable portion, making men divine by heavenly doctrine'. Clement continues:

Now the heavenly and truly divine love comes to men in this way, whenever somewhere in the soul itself the spark of true nobility, kindled afresh by the divine Word, is able to shine out; and, greatest thing of all, salvation itself runs side by side with sincere desire for it, will and life being, as we may say, yoked together.³⁹

It is clear that, for de Lubac, the Gnostic confidence in the abilities of human reason unaided by faith evoked the confidence of the secularizing political ideologues of his own day. In contrast, the Christian Hellenism represented by Clement helped inspire his own cooperative understanding of the faith–reason relation.

An alternative narrative of the impact of Blondelian philosophy on de Lubac has been adopted by several Anglo-American commentators, who have tended to emphasize Blondel's theory of tradition with reference to his scriptural exegesis.⁴⁰ In broad terms, his view of tradition as mediating history and dogma may offer a middle path between an entirely historicist approach to scripture, according to which its claims have no authority in the present day, and the extrinsicist view that scripture comprises literal truths that may be directly, systematically and

³⁷ Henri de Lubac, 'On Christian philosophy', trans. Sharon Mollerus and Susan Clements, *Communio (US)* 19 (1992), 478–506 (496–7).

³⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 2.2–4, trans. John Ferguson (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 160–8; see de Lubac, *Discovery*, 46–7.

³⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *The Exhortation to the Greeks* 11 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 248–51; also trans. as *Le Protrepique* by Claude Mondésert, SC 2 (Paris: Cerf, 1943); see Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1995), 23.

⁴⁰ William M. Wright, 'Patristic Exegetical Theory and Practice in De Lubac and Congar', *New Blackfriars* 96 (2014), 61–73; Bryan C. Hollon, *Everything is Sacred: Spiritual Exegesis in the Political Theology of Henri de Lubac* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 97–100; Kevin L. Hughes, 'The "Fourfold Sense": De Lubac, Blondel and Contemporary Theology', *The Heythrop Journal* 42 (2001), 451–62; Susan K. Wood, *Spiritual Exegesis and the Church in the Theology of Henri de Lubac* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 18–21; also Marcellino D'Ambrosio, 'Henri de Lubac and the Critique of Scientific Exegesis', *Communio* 19 (1992), 365–88.

unproblematically applied to current life. In opening the third and final section of his *History and Dogma*, which was published in 1904, Blondel presents tradition as a vitalizing power. Similarly to his concept of the absolute in *L'Action*, tradition must have an 'original force, and a foundation of its own'.⁴¹ This immediately indicates that what he has in mind is more than a mere community of practice or reading that derives its consistency from internal relationships. Neither, however, is tradition reducible to the transmission of custom, or the spoken word, or written texts, or a system. Rather, tradition is primarily a lived reality, in Blondel's words an 'experience always in act which enables it to remain in some respects master of the texts instead of being strictly subservient to them'.⁴²

Blondel does not, of course, offer any detailed prescriptions for reading scripture: for these, it is necessary to turn to de Lubac's *Medieval Exegesis*. Within this, Blondel is cited only in general terms as offering, in the face of modern scientific exegesis, a reconception of the relation between history, dogma and criticism analogous to that required in the face of the literalizing Victorine exegesis of the twelfth century, which anticipated it.⁴³ Nonetheless, his philosophy of action endorses the tropological possibilities that de Lubac would elucidate in detail elsewhere, according to which scripture impels the reader literally to turn away from the text to moral practice in the world.⁴⁴ Proving his passionate concern for material reality, Blondel writes that

in obeying the precept we make the eminent truth which it expresses come down into us. That is true; but we also transform and raise into that truth the act it prescribes. The literal precept is, so to speak, more living and more spiritual than the spirit it takes hold of. We absorb it into ourselves, and it is the one that absorbs us into it.

The true letter, then, is the very reality of the spirit. It manifests its inaccessible life to us in its depth; it communicates it to us so that we may engender it and make it live in ourselves.⁴⁵

Blondel's description serves as a reminder that the spiritual, polyphonic exegesis that de Lubac excavates in no way absolves the reader from paying close attention to the literal sense. Neither does the spiritual reading of scripture authorize the reader to ignore its moral implications. On the contrary, spiritual and literal readings engender each other. Only in literal and moral practice may spiritual readings of scripture concerned with doctrine or eschatology become rooted in the material reality of life. Conversely, only by living out the word of scripture may readers be assimilated into the truths to which scripture points, thereby themselves becoming active exegetes of scripture in the world.

Théologie: Sources in Fundamental Theology

As de Lubac's extended introductions to the Origen volumes demonstrate, his project of retrieval extended beyond the presentation and translation of texts into their constructive engagement and deployment. He pursued these objectives through a total of eleven volumes in a book series. Named *Théologie*, this was founded by the Jesuit scholasticate at Fourvière, in tandem with the *Sources* and also under the direction of its rector, Fontoynt. A review of the initial volumes shows that some focused on specific aspects of patristic theologians or approaches, such as Clement of Alexandria

⁴¹ Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics, and History and Dogma*, trans. Alexander Dru (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 264.

⁴² Blondel, *History*, 267.

⁴³ Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis* (4 vols; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000–), 3.646. For de Lubac's appraisal of Victorine exegesis, Ryan McDermott, 'Henri de Lubac's Genealogy of Modern Exegesis and Nicholas of Lyra's Literal Sense of Scripture', *Modern Theology* 29 (2013), 124–56.

⁴⁴ De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 2.127–77.

⁴⁵ Blondel, *Action*, § 420, 385–6.

and Gregory of Nyssa.⁴⁶ Published in the same year, however, was an historical study of Thomas Aquinas, an assessment, from the perspective of fundamental theology, of the contemporary political and social situation, and de Lubac's own diachronic survey of the Eucharist, *Corpus Mysticum*.⁴⁷

Ultimately, de Lubac would publish ten further volumes in the *Théologie* series. This was a greater number than any other author, and illustrates his centrality to the series, even if he was not strictly among its editors. These volumes included his three studies, separated by a period of twenty years, on the relation of grace and nature. These were grounded in an essentially Augustinian view of the continued dependence of nature on God, although contested the pessimistic Jansenistic construal of this relation, which had been theologically pervasive in France during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and arguably continued to shape much pastoral practice in de Lubac's own day.⁴⁸ In the early 1950s, there appeared de Lubac's collection of posthumous theological writings by his confrère Yves de Montcheuil, who had been shot by the Gestapo after being apprehended on a pastoral visit to members of the resistance; his study of the Church, which was enriched with copious patristic imagery; and, very differently, the first of his volumes on Buddhism.⁴⁹ Also included were his study of Origen, which was based on the two *Sources* introductions, and three further volumes on patristic and medieval biblical exegesis.⁵⁰

With the exception of the two-decade translation of Hans Urs von Balthasar's massive *Herrlichkeit*, which was completed only in 1983, the *Théologie* series ended in 1971 with a translated study of Paul Tillich.⁵¹ De Lubac comments on the polymorphous character of the series, reporting that it was originally conceived by the fundamental theologian Henri Bouillard in partnership with the Lyons representative of the publishing house Éditions Spes. Bouillard indeed produced the opening volume of the series as well as serving as its first secretary.⁵² However, on learning of the venture, the management of Éditions Spes, who were located on the other side of the partition in Paris, raised objections. As a result, *Théologie* was merged with a series on patristics, which Daniélou had been planning in conjunction with Aubier. Daniélou thus provided the second volume of the expanded series. De Lubac recalls with approval Bouillard's description of the 'twofold aspiration' behind their enterprise: to 'go to the sources of Christian doctrine' and to 'find in it the truth of our life'. Theology, de Lubac continues, while properly immersed in the divine Word, needs to take account of the 'movement of human thought'.

Despite noting the 'honourable course' of the series, de Lubac writes that, 'at a later time, when it might have played a fortunate and efficacious role in the renewal of the Church . . . diverse influences, about which I prefer to remain silent, came to condemn it to a slow death. A wind of destruction had blown.'⁵³ What were the influences to which de Lubac refers? He delivered his most

⁴⁶ Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique : essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de saint Grégoire de Nysse*, *Théologie* 2 (Paris: Aubier, 1944); Claude Mondésert, *Clément d'Alexandrie : introduction à l'étude de sa pensée religieuse à partir de l'Écriture*, *Théologie* 4 (Paris: Aubier, 1944).

⁴⁷ Henri Bouillard, *Conversion et grâce chez S. Thomas d'Aquin : étude historique*, *Théologie* 1 (Paris: Aubier, 1944); Gaston Fessard, *Autorité et bien commun*, *Théologie* 5 (Paris: Aubier, 1944); Henri de Lubac, *Corpus mysticum : l'eucharistie et l'Église au Moyen-Âge : étude historique*, *Théologie* 3 (Paris: Aubier, 1944).

⁴⁸ *Surnaturel : études historiques*, *Théologie* 8 (1946); *Augustinisme et théologie moderne*, *Théologie* 63 (1965); *Le Mystère du surnaturel*, *Théologie* 64 (1965).

⁴⁹ Yves de Montcheuil : *mélanges théologiques*, *Théologie* 9 (1951); *La Rencontre du bouddhisme et de l'Occident*, *Théologie* 24 (1952); *Méditation sur l'Église*, *Théologie* 27 (1953).

⁵⁰ *Histoire et esprit : l'intelligence de l'Écriture d'après Origène*, *Théologie* 16 (1950); *Exégèse médiévale : les quatre sens de l'écriture*, *Théologie* 41, 42, 59 (1959–63).

⁵¹ Carl J. Armbruster, *La Vision de Paul Tillich*, *Théologie* 80 (Paris: Aubier, 1971); Hans Urs von Balthasar, *La Gloire et la croix : les aspects esthétiques de la Révélation*, trans. Robert Givord, Hélène Bourboulon and Henri Engelmann, *Théologie* 61, 74, 81–6 (8 vols; Paris: Aubier, 1965–83).

⁵² De Lubac, *At the Service*, 30–1.

⁵³ De Lubac, *At the Service*, 31. Also Georges Chantraine and Marie-Gabrielle Lemaire, *Henri de Lubac* (4 vols; Paris: Cerf, 2007–), 4.211–19.

candid public assessment of these in 1969, four years after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, in an address at the University of Saint Louis. Alluding to the student unrest that had peaked the previous year, he states that it is no surprise that the crisis of the Church is also a university crisis. In both the Church and the academy, he protests, past achievements and traditions, as well as the institutions themselves, are misrepresented, with a spirit of confrontation and criticism prevailing. Tradition is felt to be a 'weight to be carried' rather than a 'living, actualizing force'.⁵⁴ To combat this, de Lubac continues, what is required is not novelty but renewal. The idea of renewal has, he protests, been variously misused to justify a failure to preach the Gospel in deference to a religious pluralism, to inaugurate hasty ecumenical projects that disrespect ecclesial distinctiveness, to evacuate the liturgy of its mystery, and to denigrate the vowed religious life. True renewal instead requires a re-engagement with historical sources. Strikingly, de Lubac implicitly presents his own project of retrieval as part of this necessary response. 'I see these reflections', he writes, 'as a pressing invitation to carry through a vast program of research which, despite an incredible mass of work too little known and poorly popularized among the faithful, has not yet attained all the fullness or the hardness desired.'⁵⁵

By bringing together the projects of Bouillard and Daniélou, the *Théologie* series combined fundamental theology and patristics. De Lubac himself evidently approved of this method, and many of the earlier volumes first published within the series have become classics. However, its wide breadth of coverage led to difficulties in ensuring a consistent approach to the integration of historical sources with constructive perspectives. Even de Lubac's own contributions to the series ranged from his Origen volume, which was built around material previously published in the *Sources*, to a study of a non-Christian religion. However, notwithstanding his own assessment of the series, its breadth points to a shifting conception of the historical boundaries and hermeneutical methods of retrieval.

Conclusion: Texts, Philosophy and Theology

In his letter to Blondel quoted earlier, de Lubac rightly stated that his 'voluminous file' of medieval and patristic texts comprised but one element of his retrieval project. Blondel's philosophy, as de Lubac himself admitted to the philosopher of Aix, 'paved the way' for his own theology, and, as has been shown, formed a continuing thread within it. Moreover, as de Lubac also here made clear, his was indeed a properly theological project: the concept of the supernatural did not emerge fully-formed from historic texts.

Étienne Fouilloux suggests that, among de Lubac and his confrères at Fourvière, the Greek Fathers served as a foil for the promotion of a Blondelian theological anthropology.⁵⁶ It is certainly true that, in *The Discovery of God*, for reasons of expedience Blondel is cited as much via allusion as by explicit reference. However, de Lubac himself states:

Every time, in our West, that Christian renewal has flourished, in the order of thought as in that of life (and the two orders are always connected), it has flourished under the sign of the Fathers. . . . In a very large part, in all the sectors touched by the Council, this *aggiornamento* was made possible by the patristic renewal of the last fifty years.⁵⁷

De Lubac himself had a lifelong passion for patristic texts, and it seems difficult to maintain that their value to him was merely instrumental. Rather, as has been argued in the course of this chapter, Blondel provided the philosophical hermeneutic that enabled de Lubac and his confrères to recover

⁵⁴ Henri de Lubac, 'The Church in Crisis', *Theology Digest* 17 (1969), 312–25 (315).

⁵⁵ De Lubac, 'The Church', 323. See also his critiques of both the French bishops and the French Jesuits in Chantraine and Lemaire, *Henri de Lubac*, 4.438–9, 490–2, 509, 513, 518–25.

⁵⁶ Fouilloux, *Une église*, 187, 189–90.

⁵⁷ De Lubac, *At the Service*, 317–18, 319.

a conception of the relation between self, God and world that modern theology had lost. This prepared fertile ground for a philosophically inflected patristic theology.

In an address delivered during an ecumenical visit to Athens and Crete in 1969, in the later period of his work, de Lubac recognized that retrieval comes in waves. His own efforts followed the Latin appropriation of the Greeks, the Carolingian recasting of both, the so-called twelfth century renaissance, Thomas Aquinas's synthesis of previous sacred and secular thought, the humanist movement, the Catholic Reform in France (in which the theology of Augustine was prominent), the Tübingen School and the Oxford Movement.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, successive generations draw out of the tradition sources and interpretive foci for constructive theology in their own context. In his address, de Lubac identifies three theological topics to which the patristic retrieval could make a positive contribution: scriptural interpretation, doctrine and ecumenism. In expounding the last of these, he sees as key the doctrines of the Eucharist, and of eucharistic ecclesiology, especially with regard to Roman Catholic–Orthodox relations. In language that resonates with scholarship today, de Lubac argues for the theological commonality of the Latin and Greek traditions. 'The Latins', he wrote, 'were enriched by the Greeks. But this enrichment was not without consequences. When one examines the Latin tradition a little more closely, as it continues into the Middle Ages, one sees that it is far closer to the Greek tradition on key points than common opinion supposes.'⁵⁹

The most bruising critiques of de Lubac and his confrères focused not on their retrieval project as such but upon the theological methodology that was presumed to follow from it, as presented in the *Théologie* series.⁶⁰ Michel Labourdette praised many aspects of the *Sources*, even if desiring a scientific rigour that was not always present in the early volumes. However, he contended that the departure of the series from scholasticism was inexcusable, because that alone 'represents Christian thought in its truly *scientific* state'.⁶¹ Contesting what he regarded as incursions of subjectivism and relativism into this systematically ordered domain, he argued that theological progress would instead be made by further developing and promoting the scholastic synthesis, including by treating God as an object of knowledge rather than as a divine subject. Another Dominican, Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, critically addressed what he presumed to be a new, Blondelian conception of truth as conformity not to speculative objects of the understanding but to mental reality and life.⁶² The Thomist philosophy of being had, he claimed, been replaced by phenomenology and the philosophy of action, with the doctrines of original sin and transubstantiation profoundly undermined in consequence, because the categories on which they depended were thought to have lost their validity. The overall result, Garrigou-Lagrange suggested, was the return to a modernist understanding of theology as no more than a function of religious experience.

These critiques now seem excessive, and for good reasons. Patristic and earlier medieval sources are rightly viewed as connecting theology to its historical roots and doctrinal topics in ways that, nevertheless, are not dissociated from experience. Diverse portions of de Lubac's vast corpus certainly find different balances of ecclesial and personal concerns. In particular, his studies of the Church and of the Eucharist support specifically Roman Catholic claims, whereas his work on faith and reason speaks to an ecumenical audience and even beyond church boundaries. In either case,

⁵⁸ Henri de Lubac, « L'actualité des Pères de l'Église », in *Paradoxe et mystère de l'Église* (Paris: Cerf, 2010), 385–93.

⁵⁹ De Lubac, « L'actualité », 392–3. For a recent correlate, Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁶⁰ For an excellent discussion of the context of these critiques, which draws on archival materials, Jürgen Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle théologie—New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 101–14; also Brian Daley, 'The *Nouvelle Théologie* and the Patristic Revival: Sources, Symbols and the Science of Theology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (2005), 362–82.

⁶¹ M. Michel Labourdette, « La théologie et ses sources », *Revue Thomiste* 46 (1946), 353–71.

⁶² Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, « La nouvelle théologie où va-t-elle? », *Angelicum* 23 (1946), 126–45, which the *Revue Thomiste* had declined to publish owing to its severity.

however, few would question de Lubac's positive impact on the theology of recent decades. The scholasticate at Fourvière closed in 1974, with its theological teaching activity relocated to the Centre Sèvres in Paris. Two years later, the Lyons province of the Jesuits itself ceased to exist, with the creation of a single province encompassing the whole of France. However, the *Sources Chrétiennes* now comprise 600 volumes, with the theological importance of this ongoing collaborative achievement surpassing even that of de Lubac's own constructive corpus. There is currently greater interest in his theology of retrieval than ever before.